

Study Tool from
The Moody Bible Commentary
for

A
GREAT
CLOUD *of*
WITNESSES

A STUDY OF THOSE WHO LIVED BY FAITH

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INTRODUCTION

“In order to understand the Bible, you must read it.” This is an axiom that we both firmly believe. A secondary principle to which we both hold is, “If you didn’t understand it the first time, read it again.” More than anything else, the understanding of the Bible requires reading it, and then reading it some more. For many generations, committed believers held to the principle of the clarity of Scripture. Among other things, this simply means that if followers of Jesus the Messiah read the Bible, they can understand it. Nevertheless, there are some qualifications for this general principle:

1. Understanding the Bible requires effort—we need to work at studying the Scriptures.
2. Understanding the Bible will take time—we won’t get it all immediately.
3. Understanding the Bible requires that the Holy Spirit open our hearts and minds to the Scriptures.
4. Understanding the Bible will happen only if we are willing to obey it.
5. Understanding the Bible will never be complete—we can always learn more.

Having said this, we all need some help from time to time to understand the Scriptures. A person may be reading the Bible for his or her own personal time in the Word and run across a phrase or a word, and wonder, “*What does that mean?*” Or a Sunday school teacher or small group leader might be preparing a Bible Study and wonder, “*How does this passage fit with the paragraph that went before it?*” Or pastors or teachers might encounter people confused by a particular verse and might need some help clarifying its meaning. It is for these reasons, and many more, that all of the contributors for this resource have worked so hard to produce *The Moody Bible Commentary*. We want to help that reader, Sunday school teacher, home group leader or pastor have a better understanding of the Bible. Of course, there are many good commentaries to which the Bible student could turn. What makes this commentary distinctive?

The Moody Bible Commentary is trustworthy. For generations Moody Publishers has had the slogan, “The Name You Can Trust.” That derives from being the publishing house of the Moody Bible Institute, an institution that has maintained its commitment to the truth of the Word of God since 1886. Since the founding of Moody Bible Institute, there have been countless attacks on the veracity of Scripture, innumerable attempts to undermine its teaching, and significant challenges to its authority. Nevertheless, in all that time, the administrators and professors at Moody Bible Institute have maintained a commitment to the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible as the very Word of God. This high view of Scripture, along with a determination to practice first-rate biblical scholarship, has made Moody the name you can trust. Thirty faculty members of the Moody Bible Institute have worked together to produce *The Moody Bible Commentary* with explanations that are reliable.

The Moody Bible Commentary is understandable. The authors and editors have striven to explain the Scriptures in a simple and clear way. They defined theological terms, clarified the meaning of difficult biblical words, identified ancient sources with which readers might be unfamiliar, and gave the geographical locations of ancient biblical cities and towns. Although the writers engaged in excellent scholarly research, they made sure that readers would not need a commentary to help them understand this commentary.

The Moody Bible Commentary shows the logic of biblical books. Too often people read the Bible without regard for its literary context or structure. But the writers of Scripture, under the superintending work of the Holy Spirit, wrote inspired text with great literary artistry. Therefore, all biblical books have literary structure and strategies. One distinctive feature of this commentary

is that it follows the structures that are inherent in the biblical books themselves. The commentary on each biblical book has an outline in its introduction. The body of the commentary follows that same outline so a reader can follow the structure throughout that specific book. Moreover, the commentary itself traces the flow of thought, showing how each individual section fits in the overall argument of the biblical book. In essence, *The Moody Bible Commentary* will provide a road map through each book of the Bible.

The Moody Bible Commentary deals with difficult verses. Sometimes the most frustrating aspect of using a commentary is that it complicates the explanation of difficult or disputed verses and fails to offer help precisely where it is most needed. The authors and editors worked hard to be alert to the possible difficulties in a text and its interpretation, and to address those issues clearly. Of course, every reader finds different questions and sees different difficulties. Nevertheless, this commentary hopes to answer the more perplexing questions. For example, does a particular Bible passage seem to contradict another? Not if it is the inspired Word of God. Also, readers of Scripture are often perplexed by biblical prophecies, wondering when and how these were or will be fulfilled. When these apparent contradictions or perplexing difficulties present themselves, this commentary will address those issues. After all, if a commentary does not address the hard or unclear verses, then it really is not much help at all.

The Moody Bible Commentary uses a literal interpretive method and applies it consistently. By “literal” we mean that the method that governs this commentary understands the words of the text in a normal way. Unless there is a good reason to think otherwise, the phrases and expressions of Scripture are interpreted according to what appears to be their plain sense. If there is a figure of speech or symbol, then it is interpreted with sensitivity to that figurative expression. However, even in the case of figurative language, there is always some spiritual or physical reality the biblical author is conveying through the figure of speech. For example, Jesus is not a literal door (see Jn 10:9), but this metaphor describes Him literally, as the only way for a person to enter a forgiven relationship with God.

Virtually all biblical interpreters agree with this “literal” approach. However, all do not apply it consistently, particularly in prophetic passages. A distinctive feature of this commentary is that it understands much of prophecy in its literal sense and even prophetic symbols are recognized as referring to a genuine reality. As a result, this approach to interpretation will affect how the commentary understands Israel, the Church, and the end of days. In our view, this method of interpretation is the least subjective and easiest way to understand the Bible.

The Moody Bible Commentary sees the Old Testament as a messianic text. The Lord Jesus taught His disciples about “all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44). In commenting on this passage, A. T. Robertson once remarked, “Jesus found himself in the Old Testament, a thing that some modern scholars do not seem to be able to do” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 2 [Nashville: Broadman, 1930], 294). Even though much of contemporary scholarship does not believe in direct predictive Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, this commentary does. It presumes that God could and did reveal the messianic hope to the writers of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, it consistently shows how these prophecies make sense in their literary context, pointing to the coming of the future Redeemer. Additionally, this commentary shows how the New Testament refers to Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of these predictions, identifying Him as the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.

The Moody Bible Commentary is based on the original languages of Scripture. The commentary uses the *New American Standard Bible* as its English language Bible text. When you see quotations from the biblical text in the commentary, they are in bold and taken from the NASB. We chose this translation for the commentary because it is, at the same time, among the more literal and readable translations of the Bible available. However, the commentary authors did not rely on the translation of the NASB. Rather, in their research and study, they used the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible. As a result, there are places where a commentary might point out a more favorable translation of a word or phrase. The authors explain why this particular translation is preferred and often show how a different English version may understand it in the same way or, if necessary, include their own translations of that phrase or word. As a result, this commentary provides a fresh exposition of the biblical text based on the original languages of Scripture.

The Moody Bible Commentary is user-friendly. A variety of elements make this commentary easy to use. Besides using understandable language, it is a one-volume commentary. By limiting it to just one volume, the commentary can be the one book on your shelf to which you can turn when you need help understanding the Bible. Of course there are times when readers will want to study a particular passage in greater detail. Therefore, the contributors included in-text citations, directing readers to works they can use for deeper study. Also, for those who would like greater depth in their study, there is a list of recommended works at the end of each individual commentary. Other helpful elements include an introduction to each book of the Bible, dealing with key features, such as author, date, recipients, historical setting, theological issues, place in the canon, and an outline. There are also maps of the Bible lands as they relate to the Scriptures and helpful charts that clarify the biblical text.

Other aids are included to help with your own personal study and deeper application. Of course, there are subject and Scripture indexes to help readers locate or return to key themes and issues as needed. At various points throughout, there are cross references to key Bible passages that discuss related issues (typically shown with cf. and the Bible verses). Also included are notes directing the reader to other parts of the commentary for further discussion of the same issue if it is discussed elsewhere. In addition, each chapter in the commentary includes some points of application for today's reader, reflecting the Scripture's teaching that it remains a light to guide our paths (Ps 119:105) and is useful in daily life "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2Tm 3:16). Overall, this commentary wants to give you an accessible resource that will readily open the Bible for you, making simple what some might think is overly complex.

Most of all, we want to encourage you never to substitute reading this commentary for actually reading the Bible. All of us, editors and contributors alike, want to support your reading of the Bible by helping you understand it. But it is the actual reading of the Bible that will transform our lives. We concur with the wisdom of Proverbs: "He who gives attention to the word will find good, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD" (Pr 16:20).

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HEBREWS

RONALD SAUER

INTRODUCTION

Author. His identity remains unknown. But he was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian of exceptional literary ability; his Greek is the most scholarly of all the NT documents. The writer had previously been among the readers (13:19), knows them well, is acquainted with their history, including past and current leaders, has the liberty to speak his mind (5:13), and displays a pastor's heart (6:1, 9) for them. The style and vocabulary differ so significantly from Paul's that it is highly unlikely he was the author. Other guesses include Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, or other associates of Paul, and even Priscilla (perhaps with Aquila) or Mary, though the masculine singular participle "tell" in 11:32 is fatal for this understanding. No one today knows who wrote Hebrews, but the first recipients did.

Date. That the epistle was probably written prior to AD 70 is inferred from two hints. First, Jerusalem's temple was destroyed in AD 70. From the letter's recurring use of the present tense, the Levitical ritual, which was suddenly stopped by the temple's demise, seems to be in operation at the time of writing. For instance, Israel's high priest still is being appointed (5:1). And on earth priests are offering "the gifts according to the Law" (8:4). The high priest continually enters the Holy Place (9:7, 25). Consequently, "they offer continually year by year . . . the same sacrifices" (10:1), as they serve in the tabernacle (13:10). Second, since the author seeks to demonstrate the superiority of the Jewish Messiah over the Jewish religion, it is most unlikely that if writing after AD 70 he would have been indifferent to the catastrophe of that year and failed to have mentioned it. From his knowledge of the OT, the writer is convinced that the first covenant, with its Levitical ritual, "is becoming obsolete and growing old" and "ready to disappear" (8:13). The temple's destruction could have well served

as conclusive proof to his maintaining that the old covenant and Levitical sacrifices were about to end, as demonstrated in God's allowing them to cease.

In 13:24 the author says to his recipients, "those from Italy greet you." This is frustratingly ambiguous. The author could have been in Italy and sent this greeting on behalf of his Italian acquaintances (in which case the author was in Italy but the destination of the letter is not specified), or he could have been in another region with Italian expatriates (in which case the author's location is not known but the letter was sent to Italy). It is impossible to be certain, but because there is so much emphasis on Jewish religious practices it seems feasible that the writer was in Italy and was writing to those in Judea.

Recipients. Regarding their ethnic identity, that they were Jewish is based on the following clues. (1) The expressions "the fathers" (1:1) and "the descendant of Abraham" (2:16) imply a Jewish descent, as do (2) Jewish antecedents in 6:1-2 and 9:15's remark that "a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant." (3) The letter's argument rests upon the OT as the incontestable authority, viewed as the Word of the Holy Spirit (3:7). (4) The minutest knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures on the part of the recipients is presupposed. And (5) the epistle's arguing for the superiority of the new covenant to the old is better explained if designed for Jews tempted to leave their faith in Jesus and return to Judaism without Him.

Regarding their past spiritual condition, fine progress had been made. They had been believers for some years (5:12), commendably weathered severe persecution (10:32-34), had been well taught by exceptional leadership (13:7), and had displayed loving service to

other believers (6:10). But they eventually came under Jewish persecution for their faith and were doubting whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah. They also sensed another and worse wave of persecution on the horizon and had “become dull of hearing” [slow to understand] (5:11). They were discouraged (12:12-13), and regressing, and contemplating abandoning their faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah for Judaism. Regarding their location, this missive was not penned for all Jewish believers everywhere. They were a particular community. For they had a unique history (6:10; 10:32-34) not experienced by all Christians. Their congregation appeared to be homogenous and was well known by the writer, who was planning to visit them again (13:19). Possibly, they lived in Italy and their previous address was Rome. In AD 49 Jews in Rome underwent a bloodless persecution and were exiled from the city. The readers had “not yet resisted to the point of shedding [their] blood” (12:4), but did suffer “the seizure of [their] property” (10:34), and seemed to have been forced to leave their home city (13:14). On the other hand, their familiarity with the temple and its liturgy seems to indicate that they lived in Judea or even Jerusalem. Thus, the author might have written from Italy to Jewish believers in Israel.

Purpose. The immediate danger threatening the readers was neither apathy, nor mere backsliding, nor paganism, nor Gnosticism. Rather, the imminent peril was apostasy (3:12). Apostasy is the deliberate (10:26) and permanent rejection of Messiah Jesus (6:6) and, in the readers’ case, a return to, or a remaining within, the Jewish faith without Jesus. The author’s purpose was to exhort his readers to hold fast to their faith in Jesus as the Messiah (4:14) because the Jewish Messiah is superior even to the biblically revealed Jewish religion. It is clear that he was not disparaging the Jewish religion but rather demonstrating that it was designed to point to the coming Messiah. He was exhorting them not to return to the shadow of the good things to come (10:1) once they had experienced the reality to which it pointed.

The five warning passages in the book (2:1-4; 3:7-4:16; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-31; 12:18-29; see the outline below) warn those among the readers who considered abandoning Messiah Jesus to fully embrace Him as the One who brings covenantal perfection and completion, or to use Paul’s term, salvation. As the interpretation

of those passages will show, some among the audience of this epistle were still fixated upon angels as servants of God (1:5-7, 13-14), the OT priesthood (5:1-4), the law of Moses, which was the old covenant (7:11, 19; 8:13; 9:9), and the earthly tabernacle (9:24). It was necessary for them to embrace Jesus as their Messiah since He is the Son of God (4:14) and King of Israel, the quintessential high priest (5:10; 7:14) who makes one covenantally and salvationally perfect (10:12-14), who established the new covenant (8:6), and who entered into and serves in the heavenly tabernacle (9:11-15). The warning passages indicate that some had not yet gone all the way to the covenantal perfection found only in Jesus, and if they failed to do so, they would be excluded from the covenant He founded (i.e., they would not be saved).

The letter’s intent is twofold: (1) Theologically, to demonstrate that the Messiahship of Jesus is the final and climactic word from God, superior to the Old Testament faith that merely pointed to Him. Jesus has “a more excellent ministry” inaugurated by “a better covenant” (8:6) than the old one of Moses (8:13). (2) Practically, not only to prevent the readers from turning away from their Messiah and returning to temple worship alone, but also to encourage them to “hold fast” to their “confession” (4:14) and thus persevere in the Christian faith and to “press on to maturity” (6:1). The heart of the letter is 5:1-10:18, which concerns the high priestly ministry of Jesus. He is in “heaven itself . . . in the presence of God (9:24) to make intercession for” us (7:25). According to 13:22, the writer calls his letter a “word of exhortation.” Accordingly, the Greek hortatory subjunctive (“let us . . .”) occurs 11 times, by which he urges his readers to join him in various endeavors.

Theme. A key word, “better,” occurs 13 times. Messiah Jesus is better, for example, than “the angels” (1:4) and than all the leading figures of the Hebrew Bible. As priest He has offered up a better sacrifice (9:23) than those offered by Israel’s other priests; consequently, His blood speaks of better things (12:24), such as our better eternal possession (10:34). Jesus is mediator of a better covenant (7:22) based on “better promises” (8:6) and offers us “a better hope” (7:19), because God has “provided something better for us” (11:40), which, in part, is “a better resurrection” (11:35). The writer’s aim in using this word is that the Jewish Messiah Jesus is even better than the Jewish religion that pointed to Him.

How does one persevere? The **RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH** (10:38)—i.e., by constantly relying on the Son of God to enable him in all Christian duties, like perseverance. A failure to stay the course means the professing believer **SHRINKS BACK** in apostasy. Vastly understated, God then **HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM**. The author is confident that he and his readership belong to that group **who have genuine faith** and will at Jesus' return obtain eternal life (the sense of **preserving . . . the soul**) (10:39).

11:1-40. The recipients were informed of their need to persevere (10:36) and of faith as the means of doing so (10:38). But what is faith? To ensure that both writer and readers are on the same page, 11:1 defines it. To prove this definition is not mere theory, the writer illustrated faith by telling stories of OT believers. They did what the readers need to do, namely persevered by faith. The common denominator for the OT characters in Heb 11 was that all of them had good reasons for not persevering and for returning to the life they had before their encounter with God, but none of them did (see 11:15). The key phrase, then, is **by faith**, occurring 19 times.

11:1-2. Prologue. **Faith** is not formally defined here, but what is given is a description of what **faith** does. There are two parts to the description. First, **faith** gives an **assurance of things hoped for**; i.e., the certainty of things future, such as the second coming of Christ, resurrection and glorification of the dead, being taken to heaven, etc. Second, faith provides **the conviction of things not seen**; i.e., the persuasion of things invisible, such as the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit living within believers, Christ as intercessor, and our access to God in prayer. These characteristics are not impractical. **For by** the possession and exercise of faith in daily life, our ancestors received divine **approval** on their lives.

11:3-12. First "By Faith" Series. To show that the characteristics of faith in 11:1 are not alien to any of his readership, in 11:3 the writer starts with Gn 1: **By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God**. There were no human eyewitnesses to the making of the material universe. Scripture attributes it to divine activity, and we believe it. From Heb 11:3 onward, individuals who displayed faith are mentioned. From Gn 4, **by faith** in the divine revelation that heaven requires bloody sacrifices, **Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain** (Heb 11:4), and **Cain** became enraged at

God's acceptance of his brother's sacrifice (see the comments on Gn 4:5-7). From Gn 5, **by faith Enoch . . . was pleasing to God** (Heb 11:5). This expression **by faith** means that he believed the disclosure of all the divine truth revealed to him was factual, that he conformed his character and conduct to it, and that he lived in dependency on God. With such faith, it is possible for anyone to thus please God (11:6). From Gn 6-9, **Noah** took to heart the warning about a flood that was **not yet seen** (Heb 11:7). But his faith was seen in building **an ark** that delivered **his household**. From Gn 12, convinced **by faith** about a **place** he would someday **receive**, Abraham left home before knowing the location of that place (Heb 11:8). After arriving in it, **by faith he lived** for decades **in the land of promise**, waiting for the Lord to give the land to him (11:9). From Gn 21, **by faith** in divine fidelity, his wife **Sarah**, though barren, **received ability to conceive** (Heb 11:11). Consequently, from this elderly, impotent couple came offspring as numerous **AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN** (11:12).

11:13-16. Editorial Commentary. In this brief aside, the author gives his own perspective on the OT people of faith mentioned thus far. They **all died in faith, without receiving** all blessings divinely promised (11:13). **But** they gradually saw these promises **from a distance**—i.e., they would be fulfilled on the other side of the grave. As their life drew to a close, these believers **welcomed** the promises or joyfully anticipated them in the next life, confessing to being temporary residents **on the earth** (11:13). True, they were **seeking** a homeland (11:14), but **a heavenly** (11:16) and not an earthly one (11:15). No doubt Abraham expected an ultimate literal fulfillment of the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant in the future millennial kingdom. Nevertheless, upon his death, he was looking for a heavenly homeland, beyond this life.

11:17-31. Second "By Faith" Series. Resumed here are accounts of other individuals selected from the OT, who demonstrated in life and action the faith defined in 11:1. It is not clear the extent to which Abraham believed in the doctrine of the resurrection, but his faith in God encompassed the possibility that God could restore life. God promised Abraham that Isaac, not some other son, would be the one through whom the promises of a great progeny would be fulfilled (Gn 21:12, cited in Heb 11:18). Yet Abraham set out to sacrifice Isaac at God's command (Gn 22:2-4). His belief in God's ability to

raise one from the dead is reflected in his words in Gn 22:5, “We will worship and [we will] return to you.” **When he was dying** (Heb 11:22), Joseph **made mention of the** still future **exodus** of Israel, and **gave orders concerning his bones** to be buried in Canaan (Gn 50). Joseph’s faith persuaded him that departure from Egypt would come and his people would possess the promised land. Owing to the conviction that he would be the deliverer of the Jewish people (Ex 2), Moses chose **to endure ill-treatment** with the Hebrew slaves rather **than to enjoy** the prestigious but temporary luxuries of the Egyptian royal court (Heb 11:25). His attention was on future **reward**, confident that suffering in the will of God would bring **greater riches** than could **the treasures of Egypt** outside of that will (11:26). As such, Moses chose to identify with the people through whom the future Messiah would come and the reproach that came with it, rather than the life of ease of an Egyptian prince. Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness were spent in unbelief, so no examples from that period are mentioned. The writer moves on to Jos 6, where **the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled**. Nothing seems more pointless and unrelated to reality than walking around walls **for seven days** blowing horns. But those walls were leveled **by faith** in the power of God. Because of her **faith, Rahab the harlot**, though morally stained, was cleansed and **did not perish along with** her countrymen (Heb 11:31). God had power over her heart, as He did over the walls of her city.

11:32-38. Rapid “By Faith” Survey. At this point the author realizes that he cannot keep going in detail. So he announces his intention to abbreviate by referring to believers in groups rather than as isolated individuals. Accordingly, in 11:32 he cites examples of the judges (**Gideon, Samson**, etc.), the monarchy (**David**), and the prophets (**Samuel**). It was **by their faith** that God accomplished amazing things through them. They **conquered kingdoms** as Gideon with a handful of soldiers (Jdg 7); **performed acts of righteousness** as David and Solomon; **obtained promises** as did the Patriarchs (Gn 12, 15, 17); **shut the mouths of lions** (Heb 11:33) as Daniel (Dn 6); **quenched the power of fire** as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dn 3); **escaped the edge of the sword** as did Elijah from Jezebel (1Kg 19) and Elisha from Jehoram (2Kg 6:30-33); **from weakness were made strong** as Samson (Jdg 16:28-30); **became mighty in war** as David facing Goliath (1Sm 17); **put foreign armies to**

flight (Heb 11:34) like Abraham routing Chedorlaomer (Gn 14); **women received back their dead by resurrection** as did the widow of Zarephath (1Kg 17:17-24) and the Shunammite woman (2Kg 4:14-17). All those belong to the victorious category.

While not victorious, but just as important, are the believers mentioned in Heb 11:35-38. Citing people mentioned both in Scripture and in the intertestamental literature, the writer refers to people of faith who did not always have great victories. In the story of Hannah and her sons (2Macc 7) they **were tortured**, refusing to renounce God to obtain **release** from captors, convinced **they would obtain a better** release, namely a **resurrection** wrought by God from the grave. **And others** in Heb 11:36 introduces the tragic but perhaps most noble category. These faithful believers **experienced mockings and scourgings** as did Jeremiah at the hands of Pashhur (Jr 20:2, 7). Jeremiah was also **stoned** in Egypt according to Jewish tradition. According to other traditions, Isaiah was **sawn in two**, Uriah the prophet was **put to death with the sword** (Jr 26:23), while others from the Maccabean period **went about in sheepskins . . . destitute, afflicted, and ill-treated** (Heb 11:37). All these accepted by faith these unfavorable vicissitudes to be the divine lot assigned them, and by faith maintained a hope in the brightest future.

11:39-40. Epilogue. All the OT believers mentioned above received divine commendation **through their faith**. Still, they **did not receive** everything **promised** to be given through the coming of Messiah (11:39). The reason for this is that **God had provided something better for us**—a better hope, better covenant, better promises, better high priest, better access to God, better sacrifice, better possession, and a better resurrection. Heaven planned that only in company with us would they enter into these incredible benefits. Eventually the Messiah, whom OT believers anticipated, did come. Now together, both followers of Jesus the Messiah, during their earthly sojourn, and OT believers, in their heavenly city, enjoy these blessings.

12:1-13. Begun at 10:32, the exhortation to persevere is finished here, by assigning seven reasons to endure. Looking back to the presentation in chap. 11 of the OT believers who endured, **therefore** indicates the writer is saying to his readers we also must similarly endure in faith. The main thought in 12:1 is **let us . . . run with endurance the race that is set before us**. The

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